



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

A Complete Catechesis for Christian Living

Breaking Open the Word
Mary Birmingham

Overview of the Christmas Season



Since most catechetical groups do not meet over the Christmas holidays, this handout is provided for “at home reflection” during the busy days of the season.

Our culture has so over-sentimentalized this feast that it is often difficult for us to get in touch with what this season truly professes.

- ▶ First evidence of Christmas observance is in the fourth century.
- ▶ There are two schools of thought about its origin:
- ▶ First: response to a pagan feast inaugurated by the Roman emperor Aurelian in hopes of strengthening and uniting his empire. The feast, *sol invictus*, was a celebration honoring the shortest day of the year in which the sun reached its lowest point. It reaches this point on December 25, the winter solstice.
- ▶ Christians appropriated this feast to their understanding of Jesus who declared himself Light of the World. The primary symbol of the Christmas season is LIGHT. Christ is the light of the world. This is one reason we put lights on trees.
- ▶ Second: Hypothesis concerning date of December 25: John the Baptist was conceived during the autumn equinox and born during the summer solstice. As Jesus was to have been born six months later that put his birth right at December 25th, illustrating God’s incredible timing.



Sharing Faith

- ▶ If Christmas celebrates the coming of Christ the Light, in what way has Christ already dispelled darkness in your own life? How would you describe the presence of the light of Christ in your own life?
- ▶ Rapid expansion of the feast was a result of the influence of the Arian heresy which asserted that Jesus was the highest of all creatures, but he was also less than God.
- ▶ The Arian heresy was refuted at the Council of Nicaea which adopted the Nicene Creed.
- ▶ The first celebration of the feast of the nativity-- a small papal mass.
- ▶ The theology of Christ is found in John’s prologue which affirmed Christ as the Word of God made flesh.
- ▶ Replica of the cave of Jesus birth (a small chapel) is under the church of St. Mary Major in Rome.
- ▶ Midnight Mass: Since wood was added to the space, it is called “mass near the crèche.” Jesus birth was proclaimed at this mass. Celebration of Midnight Mass emerged from this liturgy.
- ▶ Mass at Dawn: Early Christmas morning the Pope arrived at St. Anastasia’s Church and proclaimed the story of the shepherds. This liturgy resplendent with images of

light became known as Mass at dawn.

- ▶ A significant doctrinal theme of the Christmas liturgies: As a result of the Incarnation a divine/human exchange took place. Christ divinized humanity and elevated human beings to the divine status of God's child. We are given a share in Christ's divine nature!
- ▶ Christmas and Easter are bookends to the greatest story ever lived—God's plan of salvation and redemption begun at the creation of the world, accomplished through the Incarnation of his Son (Christmas) and brought to fulfillment in his passion, death and resurrection (Easter).

Holy Family

- ▶ The feast of the Holy Family lifts up the family of Nazareth as a model for struggling Christian families.

Mary Mother of God

- ▶ The feast of Mary, the Mother of God, while honoring and venerating Mary as God's Mother, is nevertheless a Christ-centered liturgy.
- ▶ The liturgy reflects the salvation won through Mary's "yes" to God.
- ▶ The feast defines Mary's role in the Church, a model disciple and an icon of faithful obedience.

Epiphany

- ▶ A definition of the word Epiphany means "showing forth" or manifest".
- ▶ Our focus on this feast continues to be the Incarnation of Christ. Epiphany centers its attention on the divinity of Christ that is being manifested in the world.
- ▶ Epiphany remembers the journey of the three magi. Even though it often appears that the appearance of the magi is the primary focus of Epiphany it is not. The focus is on the manifestation of Christ.
- ▶ It is another opportunity to acknowledge the sovereignty of Christ as we did on the feast of Christ the King.



Sharing Faith

- ▶ Christmas is the time we primarily celebrate the coming down of the Son of God who became one of the poor children of men and women. If that is so, what impact has that had on the world? When we look at the state of the world, what evidence is there that Christ becoming human has had any impact whatsoever? What evidence is there in your own life?

Baptism of the Lord

- ▶ The feast of the baptism of the Lord is also a feast of manifestation which is why it is located in the Christmas season.
- ▶ The feast is celebrated on the Sunday following Epiphany.
- ▶ If the Sunday of Epiphany follows January 6, then the feast of the Lord's baptism is on Monday that year.
- ▶ The Gospel readings in each of the three cycles are:
 - Cycle C: the wedding feast at Cana.
 - Cycle A: Jesus' baptism. God's voice names Jesus "Son." The Holy Spirit comes upon him and anoints him for the role and destiny he is about to undertake.
 - Cycle B: Mark's version of the baptism of Jesus
 - The Baptism of the Lord is in a sense the beginning of Ordinary Time and the official end of the Christmas season which is why the next Sunday that is celebrated is called the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Octave of Christmas

- ▶ The Octave of Christmas is comprised of eight days. Each day is a solemnity. There is also an octave following Easter.
- ▶ The Octave proclaims and manifests what it means to walk as children of the Light in this broken world that is so in need of a Savior.
- ▶ This is no time for an over-sentimentalized understanding of the Christ event. It is time to reflect on the stark reality of the Christmas season—manifestation of Christ the Light of the world and all the inherent implications.
- ▶ Christmas is a sober reminder that discipleship can lead to martyrdom. We need only hear the story of the holy innocents and the martyrdom of Stephen told in the period of the Octave to be reminded of that truth.
- ▶ We are reminded that Christ's Incarnation and subsequent sacrifice is an invitation for complete and total kenosis—a self emptying of our own lives.
- ▶ Christmas is a reminder that we are all called to witness to our faith. The word martyr comes from the word for witness. Discipleship is an invitation to die for others—to participate in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ---to carry our cross for the ongoing redemption of the world.



Sharing Faith

- Can you envision a way in which you might be called to witness to Christ? Imagine that you are called before a court and charged with being a Christian. What evidence would there be to convict you? Imagine being placed in the lion's den. How do you feel about those who courageously gave their lives for the sake of the Gospel? What would it take for us to follow their example?

Feasts during the Octave

St. Stephen.

- The feast remembers St. Stephen, the first martyr for Christianity. It honors his ministry and his martyrdom.
- The feast is a reminder that we too are called to die for our faith in Christ.
- Stephen is also a reminder of the service to which we are all called. As deacon he served the needs of the poor of their community.
- Stephen and other martyrs are often portrayed with a wreath as were war heroes who were honored for their acts of bravery and courage.

John the Apostle.

- The feast of John the Apostle recalls God's revelation to the world given to the Apostle John who gives an eye witness account of the Jesus event.

Holy Innocents.

- This feast dates to sixth century.
- This liturgy recalls Jesus' flight into Egypt and the slaughter of the infants at the hand of Herod who was searching for the heralded Child/King.
- The children are honored for innocent, martyred the lives they gave as salvation history unfolded around them.

A great part of our Christian tradition is celebrated in the days and the feasts of the Christmas season. The liturgies and feasts of Christmas are integral to complete acquaintance with the entire rich deposit of faith. The liturgies of the Christmas season celebrate and emphasize each of the primary, essential truths of Christianity and Catholicism.



Sharing Faith

- Now that you have spent time spiritually preparing for the coming of Christ in your heart at Christmas, where in life do you most need Christ to come down? What in your life is in most need of God's salvation? If Christmas also celebrates those who have witnessed to Christ through martyrdom, can you name some small ways that you have been a similar witness? In what way have you taken up the cross for the sake of the Gospel in your lifetime? How would you say you have exemplified John the Baptist's insistence that he must decrease so Christ could increase. In what way have you become less in order for God to become all in all? In what way is your heart prepared for the coming of Christ this Christmas?

DECISION FOR CHANGE:

- What one bothersome behavior or attitude might God be calling you to change in preparation for Christmas? What one spiritual activity are you willing to engage in as Christmas draws near? Have you remembered the poor in your Christmas giving?

Refer to Word and Worship Workbook by Mary Birmingham for an in depth explanation of all the feasts of the Christmas season.